

The "Witches" of Salem, Massachusetts: Part 1

By Joyce Furstenau

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the name Salem, Massachusetts? For most people it is the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. Twenty-four people were put to death as a result of these trials. It was a dark time in the history of Massachusetts.

During the seventeenth century, the average Englishman believed in the existence of an actual devil. They believed he interfered with life on earth to bring misery upon the godly. Those assisting the devil in these tasks were called "witches." Witches were generally thought to be women, although males could be tricked into participation.

The political conditions in Salem in the late 1600's appeared to be ripe for the spreading of rumors as well. The Massachusetts charter of 1629 was cancelled due to instability in England. Tensions in the New England states were fanned by several local wars with the Indians. New governors had been appointed and a new charter was about to be put into place for the Massachusetts colony.

In 1689, the village of Salem was finally allowed to have a second church that was independent of the Salem mother church. The Church at Salem Village was created. Minister Samuel Parris was chosen to lead this church. Two years later, some of the parish members thought Parris was too strict. This started a division in his church. Over time, the division between villagers began to grow. It was at this point that certain strange occurrences began in Salem.

When Rev. Parris arrived from the West Indies, he brought not only his family, but also two West Indian slaves. At that time, many of the West Indies natives believed in witches and demonic spirits. Reverend Parris's slave girl, Tituba, brought these traditions and beliefs with her as a servant in the Parris home. She was a believer in the occult. She told tales of witchcraft and magic to Elizabeth Parris, age 9, daughter of the minister, and her cousin, Abigail Williams, age 11. The girls enjoyed practicing her chants and were quite impressed with her "powers." An older girl, Ann Putnam, age 12, who lived near the parsonage, joined the younger girls in their curiosities. Tituba taught the eager girls several of these rituals and practices.

At Ann Putnam's urging, the girls began to exhibit odd behavior. They began crawling into holes, posing in strange positions, and muttering words of nonsense. They eventually became unreasonable. To the girls, it was a sort of game. To Reverend Parris, it was a sign of something much more sinister. He believed it was witchcraft. He decided to consult the new town doctor, Dr. William Griggs. Dr. Griggs was afraid to differ with one of Salem's leading citizens, so he agreed.

The girls were enjoying the limelight. They continued their odd behavior in front of others now. The entire village was taken in by the belief that someone in Salem was practicing witchcraft. Then, a fourth girl was reportedly overcome with a spell. The name of Mercy Lewis, age 17, was added to the list.

When confronted with the question of who had "afflicted" them, the girls replied, "Tituba." However, at Tituba's suggestion, they also added the names of two women who were the most disliked citizens of Salem: Sarah Good and Sarah Osborn. It has been suggested the girls still did not understand the seriousness of the situation.

The girls were asked to "perform" publicly. Eager to be the center of attention, they agreed. People from near and far came to witness their "possession." The citizens of Salem fasted and prayed for the delivery of the girls from the hands of the devil.

Tituba, Mrs. Good, and Mrs. Osborn were arrested on March 1, 1692. They were charged with "suspicion of witchcraft." When questioned, Tituba implicated Mrs. Good and Mrs. Osborn. She said they forced her to accompany them on a witch expedition.



Name _____



Date _____

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Questions

1. Where did the new Church minister come from?

_____ 2. What caused a division in his church?

- A. Some parishioners thought Rev. Parris was too strict.
- B. The church was growing too fast.
- C. There was not enough money to pay the minister.
- D. The women were taking over the church.

_____ 3. Who did Reverend Parris bring to Massachusetts besides his family?

- A. his brother's family
- B. his grandparents
- C. his ailing mother
- D. two slaves from the West Indies

_____ 4. Where did the young girls begin to learn about witchcraft?

- A. from Tituba
- B. from school
- C. from books
- D. from church

_____ 5. Why didn't the girls realize the seriousness of their odd behavior?

- A. They thought it was a game.
- B. They were only doing it in private.
- C. They were planning a play.
- D. They were planning on telling the truth later.

_____ 6. Who decided the girls' behavior was a sign of witchcraft?

- A. their grandmother
- B. their neighbors and their friends
- C. the mayor and the minister
- D. Reverend Parris and Dr. Griggs

Are there some similar situations that have happened through the use of the Internet? Describe how a blog can become an international incident so quickly.



Date _____

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